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# Do changes in socialization lead to decline in reading level?

## How parents, literary education, and popular culture affect the level of books read

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### Abstract

The influence of reading socialization on the level of books read in adult life was investigated for birth cohorts who finished secondary education between 1975 and 1998. Three forms of reading socialization were taken into account: socialization in the parental home, literary socialization at secondary school, and socialization through popular culture. Data on these modes of socialization were gathered by questioning the socializing agents (parents and literature teachers), in addition to the target group of (former) students. The level of books read was measured using direct indicators of authors' prestige in the literary field. Multi-level analyses show positive effects of parents with a high reading level and number of hours spent on literary education at school. Frequent watching of television at a young age was found to affect reading level negatively. However, trends in reading level among cohorts could not be explained by trends in reading socialization.

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### 1. Introduction

In the 1980s and early 1990s, researchers in the US and Europe reported a decline in leisure reading (Robinson, 1980; SCP, 1986; Knulst and Kalmijn, 1988; Stedman and Kaestle, 1991). Stimulating reading behavior has been a major topic on the political and social agenda ever since. The main concern was with the quality of reading behavior, or the 'literary culture', which was deemed to be under attack (Postman, 1986; Hirsch, 1987). Causes for this development were sought in the rising appeal of

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television (Postman, 1986) and the failing of the educational system (Bloom, 1988). In the Netherlands, literary critics overtly blamed literary education at secondary schools for failing to provide students with the indispensable literary background (Goedegebuure, 1989; Truijens, 1998; Steenmeijer, 2002). The complaint is not new, but so far it has not been backed up by factual evidence.

In this study, we analyzed the effects of three forms of reading socialization during the last half of the twentieth century: literary socialization by parents, literary education at secondary school, and socialization in popular culture. The first two are socialization contexts aimed directly at literary reading; the third is an instance of a context competing with literary reading. The dependent variable we focused on was the level of books people read for pleasure after finishing secondary education. Integrating several birth cohorts into the research design and retrospectively questioning them as well as their socializing agents allowed us to assess changes over a considerable period of time.

Our main research problem was how has reading socialization by parents and by teachers at secondary school affected the level of books read in adult life by cohorts born between 1955 and 1982. Henceforth, 'level of books read' will be referred to as 'reading level'. This problem was split up into three sub-questions, two of which were descriptive and one explanatory: (a) Which trends in the reading level can be distinguished among cohorts?, (b) How do socialization modes differ as to their effect on reading level?, and (c) To what extent can differences in socialization explain (possible) trends in reading level?

The aim of this research was twofold. First, alternative theoretical mechanisms were contrasted and tested. The influence of each of the three forms of reading socialization was investigated, taking account of parents' socio-economic background and the educational level at which socialization took place. Cultural socialization theory states that the more experienced people are in a certain cultural genre, the more they will participate in this genre later in life (Ganzeboom & De Graaf, 1991). However, growing up with different cultural genres, especially the genres of popular culture, could seriously impede reaching a high reading level. The alleged decline in recent cohorts' reading level is believed by many to be a result of a decrease in contact with literary culture and the rising influence of popular culture in childhood and adolescence. So far, empirical evidence for this claim is scarce and not decisive (Neuman, 1991).

The second goal was methodological progress resulting from an improved multi-actor measurement. Using data that were gathered in part among the agents responsible for reading socialization provided us with a more accurate measurement of reading socialization. Hence, its influence could be determined with more precision than in earlier research. First, former students of a large number of secondary schools who sat for their final exams between 1975 and 1998 were questioned about their current reading behavior. Second, their Dutch literature teachers during their exam years, as well as one of their parents, were questioned about the kind of reading socialization they had offered the former students.

To assess how the quality of reading developed over cohorts, and what part reading socialization played in this development, we needed a valid measurement of reading level. In this study, reading level was operationalized in terms of authors' literary prestige, measured by assessing the attention given to them in the literary

field, more specifically by the institution of literary criticism. Thus, our research consisted of three steps. First, what counts as literature was assessed, that is, which literature is legitimized by literary critics. Second, it was examined to what degree parents and teachers transmit this literature to their students. Finally, the effect of this transmission on these students' later reading level was determined. In addition to this operationalization of reading level, two alternative measurements were introduced: the number of literary books recently read, and the frequency of reading literary genres.

We begin by providing the theoretical background of the main problem: the relation between reading socialization and reading level. In section three, we supply background information on the research design, data, and method. More specifically, we describe how the respondents' reading levels were measured. In section four, the results of three multilevel analyses of the survey data are reported. In the conclusion we discuss a number of open questions more generally.

## **2. Effects of reading socialization on reading level**

Reading books by highly praised literary authors counts as an expression of legitimate cultural taste. People's preferring legitimate cultural genres to popular ones is often ascribed to the amount and nature of their cultural competence, their knowledge, and conceptions. People's information-processing capacities, their reading attitudes, and their knowledge of authors and books are deemed to have a positive effect on their reading levels (Ganzeboom, 1984; Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999).

Literary knowledge, competencies, and conceptions are acquired early in life. The parental environment and the school are especially important socialization contexts. Because building up a reservoir of experiences leads to active cultural participation (Stigler and Becker, 1977), it seems important to start early. Parents and school can offer this headstart. In striving after social success for their offspring, parents are often motivated to invest in their children's cultural- and reading-socialization. They are willing to share their cultural resources (conceptions and competencies) with their children, and in this perspective, reading socialization is a highly reproductive process (Bourdieu, 1984). Children whose parents read literary books themselves and stimulate their children to read are well acquainted with the reading of literary books. They have better chances of keeping up their reading habits later in life than children lacking this initiation. At the heart of this reproduction mechanism lies not so much a straightforward copying of behavior as the formation of a set of schemes of perception and evaluation (*habitus*) which underly and trigger concrete cultural choices and practices (Bourdieu 1984). This explanation closely follows more general socialization theories in which learning processes are presented in terms of identification (children take a socializing agent as a model for mastering values and behavioral norms) and attribution (children learn values and behavioral norms from motivating behavior with underlying causes) (Grusec and Lytton, 1988: 188–191). Literary socialization in the parental environment starts earlier than that at school; besides, the parents' presence in a child's life is usually more prominent. This justifies the assumption that the parental environment is a more important socialization

context for the reading of literature. However, people who missed parental literary socialization during their youth have to rely on literary initiation at secondary school — mainly at the higher levels. Part of the positive effect a high educational level is supposed to have on the reading of literature (Ganzeboom, 1989) may be accounted for by literary education. The literary curriculum guarantees all students in secondary education, though in varying proportions, an introduction to literary books. At the higher exam levels, knowledge of other cultural genres and the training of cognitive capacities are also an essential ingredient of the curriculum. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1964), the nature of this knowledge and these capacities links up much better with the primary socialization experiences of children from higher social classes than with those of children from lower classes. Therefore, the children of culturally active (and often highly educated) parents have greater access to higher education levels than children without this cultural background (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964; Bernstein 1970; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985; De Graaf, 1987). According to this theory, as schools fail to take account of the diversity of students' cultural background, students who lack basic acquaintance with the crucial cultural codes lag behind from the start. Accordingly, while they need compensation for the lack of parental literary socialization, they tend to profit less from the possibly beneficial effects of literary education at school than students who did receive this introduction— the Matthew effect . However, whether literary education has a positive effect on reading level, and whether its role is subordinate to that of parental socialization, is unclear. Certain developments suggest that the school system has started to acknowledge the diversity in cultural backgrounds, and that this is reflected both in the lessons' content and in the didactical methods used in class.

The question of whether literary socialization (in some cases operationalized as cultural socialization) in the parental context is important to reading level is only marginally supported by empirical results. Kraaykamp and Dijkstra (1999) found relatively little evidence for the hypothesized influence of primary socialization. Yet, a positive reading climate at home does lead to a higher level of cultural competence and more positive cultural norms, and, consequently, these have a positive impact on reading level (Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999). Elsewhere, direct effects of both stimulating reading behavior by parents (Kraaykamp, 2000; Burbaum et al., 2002) and parents' reading level on their children's literary reading have been found (Kraaykamp, 2000, 2001). However, in these studies, no unequivocal measurements of the literary curriculum at school were taken into consideration. Therefore, results concerning possible effects of literary socialization in the school context (secondary socialization) are absent. Only superficial statements regarding the effect of education in terms of the exam level are possible. In most research, the predicted positive influence of educational level on reading level was found (Ganzeboom, 1989), even when cultural socialization at home was controlled for (De Graaf and De Graaf, 1996; Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999; Kraaykamp, 2001). Hence, educational effects are not merely a result of the fact that people with more intensive socialization in the family are more likely to enter higher educational levels (selection effect). The effect appears to be also connected with what people learn at school (instruction effect). Indirect education effects have also been found: via acquired cultural or literary

knowledge (Ganzeboom, 1989; Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999) or cultural norms (Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999).

It is less clear to what extent educational effects can be attributed to literary education. According to a recent study of reading behavior (Kraaykamp & Dijkstra, 1999), giving more attention to literature in secondary education leads to the reading of more complex and more prestigious book genres and book titles later in life. As educational level and parents' literary socialization were controlled for, this result can be interpreted as an effect of literary education. It should be noted, however, that the measurement of the literary curriculum was based on reports by former students. This may have led to bias towards the students' own reading behavior and thus negatively affected the validity of the measurement.

As for changes over time in reading socialization, so far little empirical evidence has been provided that it is declining. Social-cultural trends, such as adolescents' economic independence at an earlier age and the increase in leisure time options, may be taken to point in that direction. With respect to recent cohorts, however, the results of research show an increase in parents' investment in reading socialization (Kraaykamp 2002; Verboord 2003a).

The third form of reading socialization, growing up with popular culture, has certainly been on the rise. This form of socialization implies the transmission of knowledge and skills which are deemed to compete with instead of support reading. Therefore, its influence is usually taken to be negative for both reading frequency and reading level (Neuman, 1988). In particular, watching television is believed to suppress functionally equivalent activities such as reading. One argument is that watching television may stimulate other ways of information processing; another argument stresses the development of different attitudes (Bonfadelli, 1998). The skills and attitudes fostered by watching television are oriented more strongly towards visual than towards linguistic stimuli, and they rely on a rapid pace and a fragmented presentation. Not only does this have a deteriorating effect on people's attention span, it also enhances their need for short-term gratification (Beentjes and Van der Voort, 1988; Neuman, 1991; Bonfadelli, 1998). Hence, socialization in popular culture is thought to harm people's literacy and to impede investments in reading level.

Research on this topic so far has focused on children's reading capacity. Contrary to expectations, not much evidence has been found for a direct causal relationship between watching television and reading capacity (Neuman, 1988; Beentjes and Van der Voort, 1988; Muijs, 1999). Again, the parents' role seems to be crucial. Parental values transmitted through pedagogical strategies, parent-child interactions, and the parents' own behavioral patterns affect their children's attitudes to reading and watching television (Neuman, 1991; Johnsson-Smaragdi, 1994). The extent to which this influence continues to have an effect later in life is unclear. Research has shown that the types of television programs which parents watch when their children are young do not affect the book genres these children read as adults (Kraaykamp 2001). Therefore, the explanatory power of socialization in popular culture in connection with reading socialization is not quite clear.

In light of these theoretical considerations, we formulated three hypotheses. The first hypothesis concerned trends in reading level. We expected that recent

cohorts' reading level would be lower than that of older cohorts, because the former's socialization was expected to contain less literary and more popular cultural elements. The second and third hypotheses tested this assumption concerning the influence of reading socialization. We expected parents to have the strongest effect on reading level, because their influence starts earliest and lasts longest. We also expected that changes in reading level would be the consequence of trends in the three socialization contexts.

H1: The reading level of recent cohorts will be lower than that of earlier cohorts.

H2: The influence of parental literary socialization on respondents' later reading level will be stronger than that of literary socialization at school.

H3: The lower reading level of recent cohorts can be explained by (a) a decrease in the amount and the level of parental literary socialization, (b) a decrease in the amount and the level of literary socialization at school, and (c) an increase in the amount of socialization in popular culture.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Classification of authors*

In this study, people's reading level was measured by relating information on the authors people read to information on the literary prestige these authors have in the literary field. Individual respondents' scores were weighted by this literary prestige. A detailed description of the measurement of literary prestige is given elsewhere in this issue (Verboord, 2003b). Suffice it to say that an institutional approach was used. Information was gathered on the amount of attention paid and the value attributed to authors by relevant institutions in the literary field, such as literary encyclopedias, literary studies, and literary prizes (cf. Van Rees & Dorleijn, 2001). On the basis of this information, prestige scores were calculated for 502 authors. The authors selected were presumed to cover a wide range of both critical acclaim and commercial success. Given the intended linkage with the present research, we saw to it that most authors were reasonably well known. This permitted us to obtain from the respondents a sufficient number of reading observations to establish the average reading level. Three-hundred-and-sixty-seven of the 502 authors were used in the research: 122 in the survey conducted among parents and former students, 81 in the survey conducted among teachers, and 82 in both surveys.

#### *3.2. Design and data*

The influence of socialization on reading level was investigated using new data. These were collected among former students in secondary education, their parents,

and their former teachers of the Dutch language and literature. These socialization data covered a period of approximately 25 years. The group of former students consisted of 562 respondents who sat for their final exam in secondary education between 1975 and 1998.

The (stepwise) sampling of the former students started in 14 Dutch cities (varying from 30,000 to 150,000 in population size) located in 8 different provinces. In each city, two to four schools were asked to participate, having been randomly chosen. A number of schools had participated in an earlier research project; however, these schools were also randomly selected. In total, 44 of the 55 schools approached participated in the research. This sample covered the entire range of school types: from large differentiated schools to small undifferentiated ones. At each school, teachers in the Dutch language and literature at the higher level grades were asked to participate in a survey of literary education in the period 1975–1998. One-hundred-and-ten teachers (74%) responded. They were questioned on the teaching of literature to students of one educational level in one particular year (chosen by the researchers). Next, former students who had lessons from one of these teachers in that particular year were found and interviewed. The pupils of 85 teachers, on average eight pupils per teacher, were interviewed.

Students were identified and found using information we detected in the school archives, usually the parents' (former) address. As in most instances, parents were the best way to find the students, the opportunity was taken to interview one of them, preferably the mother. This design yielded data on 711 former students (63% of the people approached) and 809 parents (59% of those who were approached). For 562 former students, information on themselves, on one of their parents (in 90% of the cases, the mother), and on their former teachers was available. Data on former students and their parents were gathered by using two questionnaires for each group, a basic questionnaire, in most cases, presented by telephone, and a follow-up questionnaire that was always presented in written format. As not all respondents filled in the follow-up questionnaire, the number of available observations on former students dropped to 489.

Though we made every effort to spread students evenly over examination years and levels, students with higher educational levels and students from more recent examination years were slightly over-represented. Nonetheless, the sample contained all combinations of examination levels and years. This enhances the perspective on a long period of literary education and its effects.

### 3.3. Operationalisation

Former students' reading level was measured using three indicators. The main indicator was the mean reading level (in terms of literary prestige of authors read) over the life course, which expresses a person's total literary experience. In the follow-up questionnaire, a list of 62 authors plus book titles was submitted to the respondents, along with a question as to which titles they had read. Each book title was a well-known or representative title of the author in question. A respondent's positive answers provided the basis for calculating his/her reading level by summing



the prestige scores of authors read and dividing the sum by the maximum number of prestige scores in the list of 62 authors. This last step was necessary because not every respondent was given the same list of authors: four different versions were used. However, author selections in these versions were similar in terms of country of origin (half Dutch, half non-Dutch), gender (half male, half female), genre (about 45 literary authors, ten authors of crime/thriller/science fiction novels, and five of romance novels), age (equally spread), and seniority of titles (one third of titles before 1980, one third from the 1980s, and one third from the 1990s). Every effort was made to have comparable author-title combinations in all sections of the four lists to obtain similar maximum prestige scores for each list.

The first indicator concerned the reading level averaged over the whole life course, thus taking account of both educational and post-educational reading experiences. Two other measurements were obtained regarding the amount of literary reading done after finishing secondary education. First, the number of recent literary titles the respondents had read from the above-mentioned list was counted. Each list contained 17 literary works published after or around 1995, the year that all former students (except for one class, that of 1998) had finished secondary education. These books could not have been part of the compulsory curriculum content at school. Hence, this score reflected the intensity of the former students' recent literary reading. Again, the title selections involved in each list were comparable.

Second, the respondents were asked about the book genres they read at present. This yielded the third indicator of reading level. The response categories were never, sometimes (one or two titles per year), or often (more than two titles per year). By introducing this indicator, we obtained some insight into the reading levels of those respondents who (perhaps by chance) had not read any of the titles on the list. In total, 26 book genres and sub-genres were presented to the respondents, in most cases, corresponding to the genre categorization that is used in the Dutch book trade. Factor analysis of the respondents' answers showed three main categories: literary books (Dutch literature, western literature, non-western literature, essays, memoirs), crime and mystery books (psychological thrillers, adventure books, detectives), and romance books (love novels, provincial novels). In the analyses presented below, only the reading of literary genres was used as an indicator of reading level (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.84$ ). All three indicators used were scaled between 0 and 10, by setting the minimum score at 0 and then dividing by a tenth of the maximum score. This allowed for interpretation of the effects of the independent variables as percentage points.

Parental literary socialization was measured using three indicators. The first indicator was the extent to which parents stimulated reading behavior when the former student was a child. This variable consisted of a scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.76$ ) containing items such as 'How often did you read to the child?', 'How often did you take your child to the public library?', 'How often did you talk about books with your child?', and 'How often did you give your child a book as a present?'. The second indicator was parents' reading frequency when the former student was 12 years old. The third indicator was the parents' average reading level. This was a combination of two of the indicators used for the former students. One part of the

indicator was the literary prestige of books read. Parents were given one of the four mentioned lists of book titles along with a question as to which titles they had read. Again, each affirmative answer was multiplied by the literary prestige score of the author involved, and these answers were summed to obtain a total prestige score. The other part was the extent to which the parent read literary books (including books read in a foreign language) when the former student was 12 years old. Based on the high positive correlation ( $r=0.70$ ), these indicators were put together in one variable. All models containing one of these three indicators controlled for both parents' average educational level as well as the responding parent's gender.

Literary socialization at school was measured using the number of hours per week teachers spent on literary education, the type of literary education, and the mean literary prestige of authors they considered. The type of literary education was operationalized using two variables: the extent to which literary education was culture-centered, and the extent to which it was student-centered. Both variables consisted of various items on the goals teachers aimed at and the texts they used in class (Cronbach's alphas of 0.81 and 0.71). The more these reflected conceptions of literature as these are propagated in literary criticism, the higher the score on the culture-centered variable. The amount of compulsory reading was also included here: the number of books that needed to be read for the final examinations added to the culture centeredness. The more goals and texts took the preferences of the students into consideration, the higher the score on the student-centered variable.

The measurement of the mean literary prestige of the authors considered by the teachers resembled that of the reading levels of both students and parents. The teachers were presented with a list of authors and asked how much time they devoted to the selected authors: no time at all, just mentioned the name, less than half a lesson, half a lesson to an entire lesson, or more than a whole lesson. These scores were multiplied by the authors' literary prestige scores; this permitted us to regard authors in terms of their prestige. The teachers' lists differed slightly from those given to former students and parents. The main difference was the lack of foreign authors on teachers' lists and the inclusion of authors who are not well known but who do receive critical attention or are mentioned in schoolbooks.

Socialization in popular culture was the third indicator of reading socialization. Former students were questioned on the frequency of watching television and the number of popular/lowbrow television programs (sports, soaps, comedy series, police/action series, game shows, action/adventure movies) they watched at the age of twelve. Information on the presence of audiovisual equipment in the household when the former student was that age was gained partly from the parents (VCR or computer in the house), and partly from the former pupil (VCR, computer or television in own bedroom). Socialization in activities outside the home and related to popular culture was measured, particularly the frequency of visiting movie theaters, dance clubs, and pop concerts at the age of sixteen.

In addition, the following variables were used in the analyses. The cohort variable was measured using respondent's birth year. The earliest year in the sample (1955) was set at 0, the most recent year at 1 (by dividing by the maximum). Gender was

coded as woman = 1 and man = 0. Educational level was operationalized using two variables. First, the examination level of the secondary education matching the literary education reported by the teacher (0 = pre-vocational, 1 = junior general, 2 = senior general, 3 = pre-university). Second, all other forms of education finished after secondary school (0 = no other educational form, 1 = junior vocational, 2 = senior vocational, 3 = university). Parents' highest educational level (average of both parents) was measured using eight categories, ranking from 0 = primary school only to 7 = university. These categories were then put on a scale ranging from 0 to 1. Four characteristics of the life course were distinguished: the number of hours per week in paid labor and studies (divided by 10), the number of children younger than 12 years, having a working partner (0 = no, 1 = yes), and the net monthly income of the household (divided by 1000).

The design of the research had important implications for the analyses. As a result of sampling more than one former student per teacher, respondents at the student level shared characteristics at the teacher level. Using regular OLS regression analysis would lead to overestimation of the precision of the effects of the variables at the teacher level. For this reason, multilevel analysis was used: this statistical technique enabled us to use the correct number of observations at each level (Snijders and Bosker, 1999). Randomly missing values in the data were replaced using the *hot deck nearest neighbor imputation* method (Little and Rubin, 1987).

## 4. Results

The analyses and results are reported for each research question.

### 4.1. Trends in reading level

The first research question concerned whether various cohorts differ in reading level. Table 1 shows changes in the reading levels of five cohort groups. The mean prestige of books read was found to be significantly lower among the most recent cohorts than among the earliest cohorts: there was a difference of 10 per cent. The mean number of recently published literary books read also decreased over birth cohorts, but not significantly. As for the third indicator of reading level, the frequency of reading literary genres, the decline was again significant: the 1955–1960 cohort reads 12 percentage points more than the 1976–1982 cohort.

Table 1 also displays trends in parents' reading level, and teachers' lecturing level. The prestige level of books read by parents, controlled for the examination level of their children, did not differ among student cohorts. Yet, the parents of the most recent cohorts reported reading literary genres more often than the parents of earlier cohorts. At school, a mixed pattern in cohort trends was also found. The most recent cohorts were introduced to similarly prestigious authors in the classroom, but their hours of literary education were reduced. At the same time, teachers' approach became more student-centered and less culture-centered. Socialization in popular culture has grown stronger over the years: for almost every indicator used here,

Table 1

Changes in reading level of former students and in socialization by the parents, literary education, and in popular culture, by cohort categories of former students and using several indicators

Cohort of former students	Former students <sup>1</sup>			Parents <sup>2</sup>		Literary education (teacher)		
	Prestige authors (0–10)	# Recent lit. titles (0–11)	Freq. lit. genre (0–10)	Prestige authors (0–10)	Freq. lit. genre (0–10)	Prestige authors (0–10)	Hours lit.educ. (0–2.5)	Student-centered (0–10)
1955–1960	3.37	1.25	2.66	2.46	1.37	4.51	1.38	3.74
1961–1965	3.18	1.20	2.59	2.67	1.75	4.84	1.34	4.84
1966–1970	2.60	0.93	1.98	2.38	1.72	3.70	1.22	4.18
1971–1975	2.54	0.85	1.92	2.92	2.34	4.25	1.21	6.14
1976–1982	2.38	0.74	1.41	2.65	2.16	4.39	1.18	4.90
F-value cohort	4.83**	1.18	4.01**	1.33	2.30	10.26***	5.31***	24.09***
Linear contrast estimate	−0.86***	−0.43	−1.00***	0.20	0.69*	−0.26	−0.17***	1.15***
Cohort of former student	Lit.edu.	Popular culture <sup>a</sup>						
	Culture-centered (0–10)	Freq. Watch Tv age 12 (0–10)	Low brow Tv age 12 (0–10)	Audiovis. Equipm. age 12 (0–10)	Visiting Disco age 16 (0–10)	Visiting Cinema age 16 (0–10)	Visiting Popconc. age 16 (0–10)	
1955–1960	5.36	6.32	5.45	0.09	4.55	5.60	3.85	
1961–1965	5.16	6.28	5.84	0.41	5.96	5.91	2.88	
1966–1970	4.87	7.13	6.29	1.17	6.72	6.37	3.33	
1971–1975	5.10	7.30	7.01	2.28	5.97	6.41	2.89	
1976–1982	5.20	7.48	6.88	3.13	6.05	6.49	2.35	
F-value cohort	2.96*	10.30***	5.85***	61.05***	3.20*	2.71*	3.17*	
Linear contrast estimate	−0.12	1.05***	1.28***	2.52***	0.95*	0.72**	−0.95**	

Source: LISO (2001) \* =  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  All variables were controlled for examination level; 1 also for number of working hours, number of children younger than 12, working partner, household income, form of questionnaire; 2 also for parent's gender, form of questionnaire.

<sup>a</sup> Controlled for examination level.

there was a definite rise in contact with popular culture at the age of twelve (or sixteen).

On the whole, for two out of three indicators, this analysis establishes a decline in the reading level of cohorts from the period 1955–1982. With reservation, Hypothesis 1 was, therefore, not rejected: recent cohorts read fewer prestigious books and read literary genres less frequently. However, this downward trend does not seem to be entirely in line with a decline in reading socialization, aside from the decline in hours of literary education and the rise in popular culture.

#### 4.2. *Differences between socialization forms*

The second research question we addressed focused on differences in the influence of various forms of socialization on reading level. The effects were estimated for all three indicators of reading level, using multilevel analysis. The results for the prestige of authors read, the number of recently published literary books read, and the frequency of reading literary genres are shown in Table 2.

For each indicator, an ‘empty model’ and a ‘socialization model’ was estimated. In the empty model, no independent variables were included. This model was estimated to split up the total variance in reading level into level components: 34% ( $1.35/1.35 + 2.65$ ), 10%, and 19%, respectively, of the variance can be explained at the teacher level; 66%, 90%, and 81% at the student level. The empty model also enabled us to estimate the total amount of unexplained variance, which was used to compute the explained variance of the socialization model.

In the socialization model—a random intercept model—all socialization variables were integrated, as were the measurements for cohort, examination level pertaining to literary education, life-course characteristics, and gender. At the teacher level, hardly any unexplained variance was left for any of the three indicators. This suggests that remaining differences in reading level cannot be ascribed to differences between teachers (or other characteristics of classes).<sup>1</sup>

All three socialization forms were found to affect reading level, though not using every measurement. Parental reading socialization was found to exert an influence mainly through parents’ reading levels. The coefficient of 1.17 in Table 2, second column, means that the respondents whose parents had the highest reading level showed, in turn, a reading level almost 12 per cent higher than respondents whose parents scored lowest on reading level. A similar result was established in the case of the other indicators, with even larger differences. At the same time, for none of the indicators did mere stimulation of reading behavior lead to higher reading levels. Literary education was found to influence reading level positively through the number of hours spent on literature. Again, this holds for all three socialization models. The educational approach in the teaching of literature was found to affect the reading of literary genres: a more student-oriented approach did so in a positive

<sup>1</sup> The amount of explained variance doesn’t approach 100, because it was calculated as the proportional reduction in explained variance, in which aggregated individual variance was also taken into account (see Snijders and Bosker, 1999).

Table 2

Multilevel analyses of reading levels of former students (three indicators), unstandardised effects, standard error between brackets

	Prestige authors read ( <i>n</i> = 479)		# Recently publ. literary books ( <i>n</i> = 479)		Frequency literary genres ( <i>n</i> = 489)	
Fixed effects	Empty model	Socialization model	Empty model	Socialization model	Empty model	Socialization model
Cohort (0–1)		–1.68 (0.45) ***		–0.90 (0.43) *		–1.93 (0.54) ***
Examination level (0–3)		0.50 (0.15) ***		0.20 (0.14)		0.61 (0.18) ***
<b>Socialization: Parents</b>						
Stimulation by parents (0–1)		–0.05 (0.43)		0.51 (0.42)		1.00 (0.53)
Educational level of parents (0–1)		0.47 (0.34)		0.37 (0.33)		0.44 (0.41)
Reading level of parents (0–1)		1.17 (0.40) **		1.37 (0.38) ***		2.22 (0.49) ***
<b>Socialization: Literary education</b>						
Student-centered literary education (0–1)		0.53 (0.34)		0.44 (0.32)		1.18 (0.40) **
Culture-centered literary education (0–1)		–0.80 (0.70)		–0.85 (0.66)		–1.99 (0.82) *
Hours of literary education (0–2.5)		0.62 (0.20) ***		0.60 (0.19)		0.71 (0.23) **
Prestige of authors taught (0–1)		0.49 (0.49)		–0.41 (0.45)		–0.29 (0.57)
<b>Socialization: Popular culture</b>						
Frequency of tv-watching: student age 12 (0–1)		–0.87 (0.42) *		–1.32 (0.41) ***		–1.66 (0.51) ***
Lowbrow tv-watching: student age 12 (0–1)		–0.12 (0.29)		0.02 (0.28)		–0.20 (0.36)
Audiovisual equipment at age 12 (0–1)		0.26 (0.32)		0.29 (0.31)		–0.42 (0.38)
Visiting cinema at age 16 (0–1)		0.57 (0.36)		–0.02 (0.35)		0.45 (0.44)
Visiting popconcert at age 16 (0–1)		0.62 (0.27)		–0.04 (0.26)		0.70 (0.33) *
Visiting discotheque at age 16 (0–1)		–0.18 (0.20)		0.05 (0.19)		–0.01 (0.24)
<b>Constant</b>	2.82 (0.15) ***	0.53 (0.63)	1.04 (0.10) ***	–0.18 (0.60)	2.19 (0.15) ***	1.62 (0.76) *
<b>RANDOM PART</b>						
Variance at teacher level	1.35 (0.29)	0.03 (0.07)	0.28 (0.12)	0.00 (0.00)	1.04 (0.29)	0.00 (0.00)
Variance at student level	2.65 (0.19)	2.28 (0.16)	2.66 (0.19)	2.18 (0.14)	4.40 (0.31)	3.50 (0.23)
R <sup>2</sup> teacher level	0%	76%	0%	46%	0%	64%
R <sup>2</sup> student level	0%	42%	0%	26%	0%	36%
–2log(like)	182,385	176,190	186,617	173,214	218,305	199,995

Source: LISO 2001, \* =  $p < 0.05$  \*\* =  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ . All socialization models were controlled for gender, additional education, number of children under age 12, working partner, number of working hours, household income, form of questionnaire, and gender of responding parent.

way, a more culture-centered approach in a negative way. The prestige level of authors discussed in class was found to have no bearing on what pupils read as adults.

Socialization in popular culture was found to make a difference only as far as the frequency of watching television is concerned. In the case of respondents who watched much television at the age of 12, [Table 2](#) shows a decline in all reading level scores: not only in the prestige of authors read but also in the number of recently published literary books read and in the frequency of reading literary genres. The type of television programs and the amount of audiovisual equipment available in the household were found to be unimportant. It should be noted that only one of the three outdoor activities, that is, visiting pop concerts at the age of sixteen, was found to affect reading level. Contrary to expectations, this effect was positive: visitors of pop concerts read more prestigious authors, more recently published literary books, and more literary genres.

We conclude that there is no clear dominance of parental socialization traits over school socialization traits. On the basis of this result, Hypothesis 2 was rejected.

#### *4.3. Explanation of trends in reading level*

The third research question was whether cohort trends in reading level can be explained by differences in reading socialization. By comparing differences in reading level between cohorts before and after the introduction of socialization variables in the model, we were able to determine to what extent these differences can be explained by reading socialization. The results are shown in [Table 3](#).

For all three indicators of reading level, the cohort coefficient was estimated twice: in [Table 3](#) expressed as the difference in percentage points between the earliest and the most recent cohorts. The first difference score stems from a model without socialization variables (only cohort, examination level, gender, and life-course variables); the second from the socialization model shown in [Table 2](#). When the second score was subtracted from the first, the difference between the two could be interpreted as a socialization effect. It was necessary to explicitly control for life-course characteristics, as cohort and age effects cannot be separated from each other in a cross-sectional research design. If the cohort effect had decreased after the socialization variables were modeled, this would have indicated that cohorts differed because of diverging modes of socialization.

However, the results show that socialization traits cannot explain cohort differences in reading level. Given the trends shown in [Tables 1 and 2](#), this does not come as a complete surprise. Both the development in parental socialization and approach of literary education turned in a beneficial direction. As for the number of hours of literary education, it may have decreased over the years, but this does not suffice as an explanation. The same applies to watching television frequently at the age of twelve. The cohort differences, expressed as the difference between the earliest and the most recent cohorts, declined only marginally for the prestige of authors read (from 17.6 to 16.8). This means that only 0.8 per cent was explained by the socialization traits measured here. The decline in the reading of recently published literary books was not explained at all by socialization traits. On the contrary, the difference

Table 3  
Interpretation of cohort differences in reading level using socialization characteristics

	Prestige authors read	# Recently published literary books	Frequency literary genres
	Difference Cohort 1955 Cohort 1982 <sup>a</sup>	Difference Cohort 1955 Cohort 1982	Difference Cohort 1955 Cohort 1982
Basemodel <sup>b</sup>			
+ Life cycle characteristics	17.6%	7.1%	19.3%
+ Socialization characteristics (socialization model in Table 2)	16.8%	9.0%	19.3%
Explained by socialization	+ 0.8	−1.9	0

<sup>a</sup> This is the difference between the oldest and youngest cohort expressed in percentage points. This difference equals the outcome in Table 1. Figures may differ slightly between the analyses as, in the multilevel analyses, a continuous measurement of the cohort was used and an extra control for the respondent's gender was modelled.

<sup>b</sup> Model contains cohort, examination level, gender, additional education, form of questionnaire, gender of responding parent.



increased by 1.9%. Finally, with regard to the frequency of reading literary genres, it should be noted that the cohort differences remained unchanged. We conclude that, for all three reading level indicators, the negative cohort trend cannot be explained by differences in reading socialization. Hypothesis 3 was, therefore, rejected.

## 5. Discussion

The reading levels of almost 500 people who sat for their final exams in secondary education in the period 1975–1998 were investigated and related to their reading socialization at home and at school. Those from early birth cohorts tend to read books at a higher literary level than do those from recent birth cohorts. Reading level was measured in a direct way: the literary prestige of authors read by respondents was established by quantifying the attention and appreciation they received in the literary field. A respondent's reading level equaled the mean literary prestige of the authors the respondent had read. Because this indicator reflected the whole life course, including the school period with its compulsory reading, we used two additional variables: the number of recently published literary books read and the extent to which respondents regularly read literary genres also served as indicators of reading level. Only for the second indicator, reading of recently published literary books, was the difference between cohorts not significant.

Contrary to what some have suggested, the decline in reading level can only to a small extent be attributed to variations in reading socialization. Parents and literature teachers do influence reading level, but mainly in a positive sense: the higher the parents' reading level, the higher the child's level. At the same time, reading level benefits from the number of hours of literary education. Parents' reading level did not decrease over the years. Although the number of hours spent on literature at school has been reduced, multivariate analyses show this has no impact on cohort differences in reading level. We came to the same conclusion regarding another factor: socialization in popular culture. Again, one trend — the growth in the frequency of watching television — corresponds to another — the decline in reading level. However, only a fraction of the cohort differences can be explained by this relation.

Literary reading, cultural critics and theorists affirm, is put in jeopardy by social developments like the neglect of classical culture, drastic reformations of the educational system, and the tightening grip of audiovisual media on cultural consumption patterns. The results of this project indicate that the situation is not that simple. First, we found no evidence that the literary background of recent cohorts is inferior to that of their predecessors. Their parents supplied them on average with more literary baggage than did those of earlier cohorts. An important factor underlying this trend appears to be the increase in educational level attained by people in the Netherlands. In addition to this, the bad influence of television is also not clear; other forms of popular culture appear to have no impact at all. Finally, taking account of the types of approach used in literary education does not yield arguments as to why traditional culture-centered lessons should remain the standard. The kind

of approach students experience hardly affects their later reading levels, and when it does (in the case of the frequency of reading literary genres), a more culture-centered approach leads to worse results than a more student-centered approach. Reversing the reduction in the hours of literary education may improve the reading level. The change towards a more student-centered orientation appears to be a beneficial one.

A consequence of these results is that the decline in reading level among recent cohorts remains largely unexplained. Therefore, we lack an adequate solution for this problem. We are facing a development that does not seem to be the outcome of socialization processes, at least not as we measured them. Yet, the divergence between parents' reading level (during their children's childhood) and those of their children is remarkable and worth investigating in more detail. Comparing earlier cohorts with more recent ones, the question is whether the latter at present continue to read at a higher level than the former. Or is there a line of fracture at a certain cohort?

This question broadens the research problem from one of cohort differences to one of developments and differences in the life courses of various cohorts. One methodological obstacle that has to be overcome is a variable measurement of reading level. Operationalizing this variable both through authors read and through the prestige attributed to them in the literary field turned out to be a fruitful approach. Using a multidimensional measurement offers not only a more valid insight into the compound nature of the reading level, but also the opportunity for future research to examine which aspects of reading level are contingent upon specific forms of reading socialization. Furthermore, measuring reading behavior using concrete authors and titles allows other product-inherent attributes that may be considered relevant by readers to be distinguished. However, at which point in the life course titles were read, remains a difficult question to answer for most respondents to retrospective questionnaires like ours. A solution may be to follow respondents' reading behavior over a longer period of time.

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